



passa porta seminar 2016

NEED & NECESSITY

Report on the discussions of the ‘core group’ writers

by Jack McMartin

Writers [Andrey Kurkov](#) (UKR), [Neel Mukherjee](#) (UK), [Jeroen Olyslaegers](#) (BE), [Gustaaf Peek](#) (NL) and [Cécile Wajsbrot](#) (FR) settle into the first-floor meeting room at Passa Porta, the International House of Literature in Brussels. This ‘core group’ has converged here, a block south of Molenbeek and a block north of the Place de la Bourse, for the second, bi-annual Passa Porta Seminar from 21 to 24 March, as part of [Literary Europe Live](#) and [Europe by People](#). In parallel with their colleagues in two ‘new voices’ groups (one [French-speaking](#), one English speaking), they will share three days of discussions about the seminar’s theme: the necessity of literature and the needs of writers. The terrorist attacks of March 22, which unfolded on Day 2 of the seminar, would bring reflections on this theme into ever sharper relief.

Day 1

writing war | literature vs. non-literature | soul engineering

After words of welcome by organiser Piet Joostens and round-table introductions by the five authors, moderator [Matthijs de Ridder](#) explains the seminar format: the writers have each prepared an original text, a ‘keynote’ responding to the seminar’s theme. Each of the five sessions – one on Monday and two each on Tuesday and Wednesday – will begin with the reading of a keynote, to be followed by a group discussion responding to the text. Highlights from the discussions will be shared with the public at a [closing-night event](#) held on Thursday evening at Passa Porta.

Writing war

Paris-born writer and translator [Cécile Wajsbrot](#) opens the first session with her keynote, [‘The Day After’](#):

[...] On the radio, the chatter of voices gets louder.

Eyewitness accounts – those who were at the Bataclan and managed to escape, those who provided help, those who were seated at a café terrace –, comments, politicians, journalists, like a surplus of words seeking at all costs to fill the void in the streets. Words that sound alike, words that keep recurring – massacre, carnage, war, horror, bewilderment. And the images, on television, those we are used to seeing in other parts of the world and that have now been imported to Paris, where we live. Familiar street names, places we know or even visit... These empty, deserted streets, which indicate that this time, the event really did happen here. This silence we come up against as though duplicated by the words we come up against. Yes, it’s paradoxical, we need words, we need language, but certainly not the constant repetition that empties them of meaning. We need silence, too, we need a moment to collect ourselves, we need dignity. We need time.

This first section of Wajsbrot’s keynote sets the scene for the group discussion: How to find the words and repose to write in a literary way about war in its aftermath?

All five writers agree: *We need time*. For Wajsbrot, this involves a process of ‘settling’ that is more than just letting time pass. It means the gradual shedding of immediacy, and with it the shedding of the language used to describe the immediate event itself. “We must be silent until the appropriate distance has accrued between the event and the writing,” she says. Writers must “wait for the moment when, settled at last, any sense of obligation will be forgotten and all that remains is the personal, literary point of view, which will have had time enough to construct itself, in the margins, from a decentered perspective.”

In the meantime, responds Andrey Kurkov, writers will continue to write. “The writer is the first witness in any kind of crisis, be it social, political or humanitarian, and writers’ work at the front tends to take the form of opinion pieces, blogs, bits of news posted on social media, journalism.” It is precisely these non-literary forms of writing – and of activism – that take on extra importance in times of war and social upheaval, he says.

This is not new, notes Cécile Wajsbrot: Virginia Woolf writes of a similar shift in her diary entry for 23 September 1939. “Once more we are journalists,” she laments. The

entry was penned three weeks after Britain declared war on Germany, while Woolf was writing what would be her last novel.

Many writers trade fiction for journalism in wartime, but does this mean that they must wait until the 'pressure of events' has subsided before writing literary fiction that sticks? In the case of Ukraine, says Andre Kurkov, the answer appears to be 'yes'. "I think writers come into being through war, and then there is a vacuum before any enduring fiction on war comes into being. Seventy-two novels were written in Ukraine in the two years following the Orange Revolution. All of them have been forgotten."

Literature vs. non-literature

Wajsbrot goes even further to say that a work's relevance as literature and its proximity to the wartime events and lives it describes is what separates non-literature from literature, *écriture* from *littérature*. It is "the difference between writings due to circumstances, rarely a success, and those due to necessity," she writes.

Here we inch closer to the seminar's first conceptualisation of the 'need' of literature – the seemingly existential need for distance between an event on the one hand and its internalisation and literary expression by the writer on the other. In Gustaaf Peek's words, "A writer writes when he's good and ready. It's very hard to force a subject on a serious writer."

Neel Mukherjee teases out this tension between timeliness and timelessness, the former being the measure for relevance in journalism, the latter the measure in literature. "Hasn't this spectre of relevance always haunted literature?" he asks. "Relevance as timeliness is a construct manufactured by journalism. In literature, relevance is conferred by posterity."

But what determines which literary works survive? "Ironically, literary tastes and judgements of value change with the times. It's a shot in the dark."

The upshot of this, says Jeroen Olyslaegers, is that today's readers gravitate toward the antagonists found in terror-frenzied newspaper headlines rather than the protagonists found in literature. "Terrorists have captured the imagination as writers used to do," he says, evoking Don DeLillo's dictum. "Perhaps it is time for writers to capture it back."

"Actually, I think the world of the arts and of literature has remained fairly autonomous in the face of terrorism," counters Neel Mukherjee. "I don't think it should be the ambition of literature to be relevant in the same way journalism is." Cécile Wajsbrot agrees: "Literature is what best explains events – but in the aftermath."

"But why the distance between event and book?" presses Gustaaf Peek.

“Because I believe in literature,” responds Wajsbrot. “I believe we need a different set of words to describe wartime events, words different from the vocabulary of journalism and the language used to describe the event as it happened. This takes time and distance.”

Soul engineering

“For me, literature is a story with a statement,” offers Andrey Kurkov. “Non-literature is a story without a statement.”

“And what would you call *The Communist Manifesto*?”, asks Neel Mukherjee, prodding. “I’d call it a statement without a story,” responds Kurkov.

“I don’t know if I can agree with that,” says Mukherjee, smiling. “Perhaps it is more helpful to discuss what literature *does* rather than what it is.”

Gustaaf Peek: “What literature all too often does is exclude. But as soon as we think of literature as art, and of writers as artists, literature becomes inclusive. Writers should not be afraid to call themselves artists. Only then does literature become something that comforts. Only then is it good for the soul.”

“But what if literature is being used for ‘soul engineering’, as it is in Russia today?” counters Andrey Kurkov. “Nowadays, there are two groups of Russian writers: the ‘incorrect’ writers who criticise the government and whose work is relegated to the Internet, and the ‘correct’ writers, who, answering Putin’s call, are helping ordinary Russians to become good patriots. These are the writers getting published, the ones being sent to book fairs at the government’s expense, the ones taking part in Soviet-style soul engineering.”

Roused, Jeroen Olyslaegers voices a need for writers to push against the cooption of literature by nation-builders and ideological zealots. His comment rounds off the first session: “Twenty years ago, I used to find words like ‘literature’ and ‘art’ embarrassing and status-quo. Now they have become subversive.”

Day 2

Euromaidan | money | tabula rasa | writers reading | blue street lamps

Having presented his keynote, [‘Which Weapon Should the Writer Choose?’](#), at the literary event held at Passa Porta the previous evening, [Andrey Kurkov](#) is set to discuss it further with the group on the morning of Day 2.

But the cadence of the seminar is broken as news breaks of two terrorist attacks at Brussels Airport and Maalbeek Metro Station. The mood at the table is anxious. Cell phones light up with messages from concerned friends and family members. The sound of tree trimmings being fed through a woodchipper in a nearby square is briefly mistaken for machine-gun fire. The decision is made to cancel the rest of the week's evening events, except Thursday's closing night.

In this tenuous headspace, Andrey Kurkov opens the second session.

Euromaidan

21 November 2013: tens of thousands of pro-Europe protesters fill Kiev's Maidan, just a five-minute walk from Andrey Kurkov's writing desk. The demonstrations would signal a sea-change in Ukrainian political life and set off a wave of bloody civil unrest, culminating in the resignation of the sitting government and the ouster of President Yanukovich in February 2014.

It would be more than two years after Euromaidan before the author of eighteen novels, seven children's books and twenty film scripts picked up his pen to write fiction again. Leveraging his status as one of Ukraine's most prominent and well-respected Russian-speaking authors, he and a small cadre of fellow writers chose instead to take to the road, visiting villages in the ethnically-diverse regions of Bessarabia and Transcarpathia, where they organised literary events aimed at encouraging divided communities to engage in public discussion.

"In some sense I stopped being a writer and became a 'responsible citizen' for whom the values of the state had taken precedence over the values of literature," writes Kurkov in his keynote. "Over the past two years I have come to realise the importance of the spoken word over and above the written word. Literature doesn't teach people to speak, nor does it encourage many readers to think." He recalls one visit to the desolate town of Sievierodonetsk in eastern Ukraine, where the only person willing to talk to him was a 10-year-old schoolboy.

Kurkov draws a distinction between Ukraine's 'visible writers', who stopped writing fiction and started engaging with current affairs after Euromaidan, and its 'invisible writers', who retreated from public life and were silent on the country's political situation. He is particularly critical of the many Ukrainian writers working in the Russian tradition who "rushed to assist the Kremlin in reshaping the collective consciousness of Russia's citizens, in uniting society around a common 'great Russian' ideology."

“Some writers even set about purposely creating the image of a new enemy – Ukraine,” he continues, “whilst at the same time rehabilitating the Soviet Union's traditional enemies – the USA and Europe.”

In the face of growing Russian nationalism and nostalgia for the Soviet past, Kurkov sees an urgent need for civically-engaged writers in Ukraine: “In times such as we are currently experiencing in Ukraine, writers need to make themselves visible in a more literal sense, by appearing in public more often.” This is not a call for writers to enter politics, although Kurkov admits some will find it irresistible not to. Rather, it is a call for ‘masters of the monologue’ to engage in dialogue: “The best audience for a writer is just one person, who will look you in the eye and wait for you to finish talking in order to ask questions,” writes Kurkov. “Without dialogue there is no writer; without dialogue there can be no peace, no love. Without dialogue war will continue to rage, both on the frontline and in people's hearts and minds.”

Neel Mukherjee opens the group discussion: “This wonderful keynote calls to mind Adorno and others who have said, ‘no poetry after Auschwitz’. They, like you, are talking about how history has overtaken fiction. You have mentioned the turn to writing journalism in times of war. What about writing nonfiction?”

Kurkov: “Yes, in nonfiction, there is no romanticising the past. It is counterbalanced with fact and is much more straightforward. It reminds us of what is happening and gives a new evaluation of events.”

That may be so, says Jeroen Olyslaegers, but nonfiction still remains embedded in a narrative, and that has its implications. “You have these layers of language in nonfiction that then turn into a script. There is always fiction in nonfiction.”

“You did write *Ukraine Diaries* knowing that what you wrote in your diary would be published, right? Did you write differently knowing this?” asks Cécile Wajsbrot.

“Yes and no. I included many passages about my kids, my friends,” responds Kurkov. “They were published in the Russian version as-is but were censored in the English translation, in the tradition of protecting the people I was writing about. It did not occur to me to censor these things myself while writing.”

Moderator Matthijs de Ridder digs deeper. “The diary chronicles your experience of the revolution and was written for your Austrian publisher. Did you have a reader in mind?”

“All writing is public,” says Kurkov. “Sometimes one codes one's writing a certain way –”

“That's because you imagine it can be cracked, otherwise why code it?” interjects Neel Mukherjee.

"You are talking about writing for an implied reader," says Kurkov. "Some people write diaries for their grandchildren. But many people keep diaries as a purely medical act. Diaries can be therapeutic."

For Gustaaf Peek, language is less a remedy than an affliction, the writing process a slow road to recovery: "Language is a virus. Writers need a strong pill to get through the here-and-now. The writer takes the pill, the virus dies, and the writer recuperates. When you have regained your strength, you can write."

"Perhaps that is why none of us are writing today," says Cécile Wajsbrot.

"Some pill," says Jeroen Olyslaegers, to the sound of blaring sirens in the street.

'Money is the elephant in the room'

Matthijs de Ridder: "Let's turn the focus to the necessities of writers. Is there any good to be expected from government involvement, government subsidies for writers, beyond Soviet-style soul engineering?"

"In Ukraine, it's a market problem as much as a subsidy problem," says Andrey Kurkov. "You can't survive as a writer. Grants for writers and publishers simply don't exist."

"In the western world, governments support writers because literature doesn't matter and cannot topple them," says Neel Mukherjee. "That is not the case in other countries, where no subsidies are offered."

"In my experience, the question of money must be separated from the question of writing," says Cécile Wajsbrot. "I can't live entirely off my books, although I'd love to. This is why some kind of state involvement is a good thing. The most important thing for a writer when writing is 'oblivion' – forget your family, the world, your publishers and just be alone. (Kurkov nods in agreement.) That can't happen if you are constantly worrying about money. A writer needs freedom. I honestly felt freer working part-time while writing than I did trying to make ends meet with my writing alone."

"I'm like a religious zealot," says Gustaaf Peek. "I've dedicated my life to literature. Success is great, money is great. But I relegate the fear of failure to the work, not to my financial situation."

"Money is the big elephant in the room," says Neel Mukherjee. "Frankly, I don't encourage young people to become novelists. For ninety-nine percent of us, it doesn't pay."

"Would you ever *teach* writing?" asks Andrey Kurkov.

"I can see the value in teaching people how to *read*, but I'd never teach something like how to write fiction. Maybe how *not* to write. Or how to quit writing. I get a lot of people who ask me 'How can I become a writer?'. I tell them: 'Don't. Do something else.'"

“Why do we write what we write despite the fact that it doesn’t make us much money?” Jeroen Olyslaegers asks himself outloud. “I suppose I do it for my readers. If I have a little village of readers, I’m satisfied. Freedom is always an illusion. From the moment I visualise fame and fortune, the writing becomes more difficult.”

Tabula rasa

After a break for lunch, the writers gather for [‘A Fireside Séance’](#), the keynote by Flemish columnist, novelist and playwright [Jeroen Olyslaegers](#).

Olyslaegers starts by conjuring a dialogue in the opening chapter of Louis Paul Boon’s masterwork *Chapel Road* (1953) between a writer and his companion: “What do you have to contribute to literature?” the companion asks the writer, “knowing you are up against Lautréamont, Dostoyevsky, Proust, Céline, Lawrence, the anonymous writers of fairy tales and fables...” These are the ghosts that emerge out of the darkness and come to sit around the fire, a séance of literary giants. “Each of these ghosts has his own truth, his own climax, his own oeuvre (whether forgotten or not); each has had so much influence on so many others,” writes Olyslaegers.

It is possible that adding something new to all this literature is *impossible*, explains Boon’s protagonist to his companion. But the dusts of time begin to fall and eventually settle, and the need arises once again to wipe the slate clean and start anew. Olyslaegers, echoing Boon: “Do we not all want to articulate ‘the world-of-today with our own words’, in complete awareness of the existence of every great writer and at the same time also, as if those two were to be united, to maintain a wilful word blindness with regard to everything, literally everything, that was ever put down on paper?”

This need to articulate in a radically new way is, for Olyslaegers, the starting point for understanding the need of the writer: “Every writer knows that his path has already been levelled in part, but can just as well indulge in the illusion that he has arrived in territory that he is the first to discover, where the carpet of snow still lies untouched and where the trees have only come into existence because he is going to try to capture them in words.”

“The need to stray and to stumble across unknown territory is just as important as the acknowledgement of reference points, of a tradition in which we write and think,” Olyslaegers continues. He balks at writers who feel the need to announce, however slyly, the tradition to which they belong or the writers they see as benchmarks. “We have names for this ailment. We call it ‘intertextuality’,” he writes. “Respect for tradition, or rather, the recognition of your own place in this tradition, seems absurd to me in these times, far away from where the world rages.”

His insistence on 'writing anew' is grounded in a belief that literature has the power and obligation to fundamentally transform and, when necessary, replace stagnant stories and the traditions and institutions that congeal around them – literally, a revolutionary view of literature. "It is no innocent fight that I see raging outside my writing room. It is about telling stories, about laying foundations and a tradition, about what reality is and what belongs to this or that ideology. We watch an old paradigm die and, like a birth, that impending death offers up a violent spectacle."

This brings us not so much to the need of literature, says Olyslaegers, but rather to what literature needs to do, that is, offer alternatives to stories that themselves offer none: endless economic growth, zombie democracy, the unending depletion of the planet. This search for alternatives has already begun, he writes: "People in so many countries are actively starting to think about alternatives, are generating a bottom-up movement that is rolling up its sleeves and that, step-by-step, is making a new world real and feasible in their own community."

For Olyslaegers, a tabula rasa is the only viable starting point for *writing* this world anew, that is, for 'making a new world real' – and this in its past, present and future tenses: "Voices are increasingly being raised to the effect that Europe is again being ravaged by the same forces that in the 1930s led our grandparents and great-grandparents straight into the horror. It is precisely through cinema and literature, both to a certain extent a collection of coagulated stories, that this period has taken on a form in our collective memory that makes such comparisons even more frightening. Chasing away such ghosts and reinventing that time with the imagination which a writer has at his disposal is more than a longing for a tabula rasa. It is a position; it means that history and literature continuously need to be enriched so as to escape from the god of the cliché."

Having vanquished these ghosts, the séance is closed.

Neel Mukherjee, the first to break the spell: "Originality. It's a relatively new phenomenon and we have the English Romantics to thank for it. Before that, authority was about writing in a tradition."

"To be clear, I am not claiming to be original. I suppose you could say I write in the tradition of Boon. My writing starts from the *illusion* of nothing, the illusion of originality – I need a tabula rasa to create art," responds Olyslaegers.

"I actually find it comforting to work in the shadow of writers who have come before me and have, to an extent, armed me. In fact, I like to think of literature as a series of conversations with writers who came before, and I see other people's books as conversations with those writers. In *The Accidental*, for example, Ali Smith has a conversation with Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Teorema*. In my second book, *The Lives of*

Others, I was very much having a conversation with Thomas Mann. This is how I experience intertextuality; it's a very personal thing. If I were to stop reading, I think I would stop writing. I live through the texts I read."

"I recognise that," says Olyslaegers. "I wrote a whole novel about a line from a Louis Paul Boon book, *Open gelijk een mond*. Actually, I started reading Boon as a sort of antidote and realised I needed the book to guide me through 1990s Belgium, a bizarre time here – the country went completely mad after the crimes of Dutroux came to light. At times it felt like Boon was speaking directly to me. He helped me make sense of it all."

Olyslaegers pivots: "We have been talking about intertextuality, but I'd like to propose another way of thinking about what language does for the reader, the receiver of the message. I'm thinking of John C. Lilly, who studied the language of dolphins. What did he find? Communicating is a sort of radical download: I say something to you; you listen to what I'm saying, and in doing so you reinterpret your image of who I am. The message changes you."

"You are talking about empathy," chimes in Cécile Wajsbrot. "You are asking 'how does literature change us?'."

"That reminds me of [a recent neurological study](#) which found that reading opens new empathy pathways in the brain," offers Neel Mukherjee.

"Yes," says Olyslaegers. "Empathy, the effort to imagine how another person lives, is something that should be taught to all readers." And this moral act precedes any prescription of right and wrong, he continues: "I think it's important for writers to defend the act of empathy, no matter what. Say you want to get inside the head of today's attackers. Not everyone will appreciate that effort. But if you want to get in the head of a firefighter who responded heroically to the attacks, everyone would eat it up."

Writers reading

The conversation now turns to writers as readers of their own work – first as writers reading their work for an audience, and then as part of the drafting process:

"I hate reading my own work. Having written the thing is enough," sighs Neel Mukherjee. "I prefer to read other people's work at my readings – I'm especially fond of the American poet Maureen McLane, she's brilliant. Or I shut up and listen to other writers who read their work well. Kevin Barry, the young Irish writer who has a book on John Lennon, is amazing at reading his own work. I'm mesmerised."

"In Dutch and Flemish literature, there is a tradition of reading for an audience," says Jeroen Olyslaegers. "There are organisations professionally offering these kinds of

reading evenings, and this has influenced my writing. I enjoy reading to an audience; it has enhanced my ability to connect with readers and has improved my readers' connection with my texts."

"In France, there's a different tradition," says Cécile Wajsbrot. "It's uncommon to ask a novelist to do a reading. Instead, they have actors read excerpts from the work, sometimes even while the author is present. The result is theatrical – your words are being acted out, not read."

"What about reading your own writing as part of the drafting process?" asks Matthijs de Ridder.

"How I work is, I do several drafts and in between the text is just resting," says Cécile Wajsbrot. "I *write* the first version. Only with the second and third versions do I become a *reader*. This is when two bad sentences become one good one and I can gain distance, amend, improve."

"My problem is I can never be one-hundred-percent satisfied," says Andrey Kurkov. "For three of my novels, the experience of re-reading them years after publication resulted in me rewriting entire chapters – and now they've been published in new versions."

"How to let it go..." ponders Jeroen Olyslaegers.

Blue street lamps

"Jeroen, in your keynote you voice a need to return to those very domains where so many authors have already been: historical periods such as World War II. You are currently writing a historical novel set in Antwerp during the war. A question for the table: How do you solve the conundrum of staying true to history and writing fiction for posterity?"

Cécile Wajsbrot: "That question reminds me of *The Act of Killing*, the documentary film by Joshua Oppenheimer about the Indonesian massacres of 1965–66 where the perpetrators return to the site of their crimes and re-enact exactly what they did."

"There is a perverse pleasure involved in this kind of telling of your role in 'history' and explaining in detail 'how you did it', however atrocious your acts were," says Gustaaf Peek.

"Fiction, and re-enactments, can bring knowledge and understanding in a way that history cannot, I think," adds Neel Mukherjee. "And writing historical fiction also allows you to play with the delicious thing called the unreliable narrator."

"For me," says Olyslaegers, "the beauty of the historical novel is in the factual details: When I learned that street lamps during World War II in Antwerp were shaded

blue to remain invisible to bomber planes overhead, I knew I had stumbled upon a crucial detail for my novel.” (All the writers at the table voice their recognition of similar ‘ah-ha’ moments.) “This kind of novelistic detail adds an entirely new dimension to the story. It distills a complex historical situation – wartime in a great European city – into a single image.”

“If I may,” says Matthijs de Ridder, “I’d like to close the session by reading the opening lines of Louis Paul Boon’s *My Little War* (1947). I think it captures much of what we have discussed in the past two days and, perhaps, captures a bit of what we are feeling today:

You write your Little War.

You’d rather write a different book – grander, deeper, more beautiful. You’d say “these are the curses and prayers of the little man in the face of the big war, these are the songs, this is THE BIBLE OF THE WAR.” And then the next day you’d like nothing better than to smash your pen to pieces – an exhilarating feeling – but then the day after that you’d have to go buy a new one – because you’ve just got to write, it’s a natural urge. One man curses till he blows a fuse, another bangs his head against brick walls.

You write your Little War.

To pass the two hours between the day’s last session and dinner, the writers take a walk through Molenbeek.

Day 3

The new political novel | ‘literature saved my life’ | war of words

Kicking off the third and final day of sessions is London-based, Indian-born writer [Neel Mukherjee](#). He is no stranger to Belgium, having ‘broken the back’ of his ambitious novel, *The Lives of Others*, during a stay at the Passa Porta’s writers’ residence in Brussels. The book would go on to be shortlisted for the 2014 Man Booker Prize.

Mukherjee opens his keynote with a simple question: *Who needs fiction?* “It is difficult to make a case for the *need* for the novel,” he writes, “unless it be a very fundamental need for narrative in humans. We understand the world through narrative, but many people, such as mathematicians, or astrophysicists, would justifiably disagree with this. A more cogent case can be put together for what the novel needs, or what is necessary for the novel form, but this would have as many answers as there are novelists

in the world. Far better to talk about if and how need and necessity feature in the novel; in other words, need and necessity as subjects.”

This thought leads Mukherjee to a short literary history of the novel, starting with its rise as the genre *par excellence* of ‘proto-capitalist individualism’, pioneered by writers like Dickens, Balzac, Austen, and picked apart by writers like Watt, Moretti, Gay, Jameson, Lukács, Mann. Mukherjee then takes us through to the ‘modernist moment’, when European fiction turned away from money and “towards the interior, towards the mechanics and elasticities of form and language”, towards the text.

After this, things get murky. “What we have in our late-capitalist times is an apparently vast spectrum of fiction,” writes Mukherjee. “Historical, realist, mysteries/thrillers, fantasy, science fiction, novels about love, marriage, divorce, heartbreak, novels about migration and immigration, technology, the Internet, virtual reality, things, non-spaces such as airports and waiting rooms, novels about that seemingly endlessly fascinating thing, the self.”

“But you’d have to look very hard to find, especially in the Anglo-American world, fiction that transparently acknowledges that increasingly (and dizzyingly) complex triangulation of labour, capital and product that lies at the foundation of all human lives.”

“Why has the novel in English so inexorably converged on chitchats about relationships and navel-gazing?” begs Mukherjee. One answer, he says, is that the free-floating, unidimensional novel of today is a “perfectly logical fruition” of a literary form focused from the beginning on “exploring individual lives to the exclusion of everything else.”

But a changing world calls for a change in form. “At a time when the world is only just waking up to the fact that the late strains of capitalism have possibly not created the best of all possible worlds, where is the novel form’s awakening to this?”

The new political novel

Mukherjee’s answer: *Buddenbrooks* by Thomas Mann, *The End of Days* by Jenny Erpenbeck, *The Human Stain* by Philip Roth, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood – all books that talk about individual lives but see them in a larger matrix; “see the causation, as it were, of the particularities of those individual lives, the forces that have produced them.” These books “reach towards the way the personal is always, inevitably, the political” and explore “how economic orders shape both our inner and outer lives”. They “turn away from individuals in a vacuum and return to the individual as part of a bigger order, as part of history.”

“Storytelling has had its day,” says Mukherjee. “Now we need meaning.”

The stakes, for the future of the novel as a literary form and for the individuals from which it takes its inspiration, couldn't be higher: "The true costs of unbridled late capitalism haven't even begun to be counted. Because it is everywhere, because it can appropriate and devour anything, because it can erase, mislabel, miscategorise, make us forgetful and gently, subtly, yet lethally effectively demonise our efforts to remember, it is the moral duty of the writer to resist. It is a need, a necessity. Fiction must be a quarrel with the times, otherwise, why write?"

Gustaaf Peek opens the discussion: "Did you set out to write a political novel when you started *The Lives of Others*?"

"Yes. I was thinking about equality, haves and have-nots, revolution and terrorism. The words that inspired all this were James Salter's: 'How can we imagine what our lives should be like without the illumination of the lives of others?' Writing about others' interiorities, that is the moral quality of the novel," responds Mukherjee.

"Did you write your novel with a moral programme?" Peek presses.

"A moral programme is moralistic, not moral," responds Mukherjee.

"So you are writing about deeply personal issues while also writing a political novel?"

"For me the two are inseparable. I want to rescue the term 'political novel' from what it has fallen to. That is what I am bringing to the table today."

Cécile Wajsbrot: "In your keynote, you mention Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir as examples of the old-mould, *engagé* writer. It is true, for a long time, Sartre was considered the epitome of the engaged writer. And yet, at times when it would have been interesting to do so, he didn't engage, de Beauvoir didn't either. It was not until the political climate changed in France and it became possible to do so that Sartre became truly engaged. Indeed, he did what he could to make up for lost time. So I think it is important to acknowledge these kinds of political limits, as you do, and to realise that the foundation of post-war France, the resistance, and to some extent the role of the *engagé* writer, is a total myth."

Mukherjee: "Perhaps a better form of engaged author would be Jean-Luc Godard. Save for his fleeting interest in Maoism, his films are political but not in that way. When he got interested in prostitution, he made two political films about how certain people live in society. When Krzysztof Kieślowski died, Channel 4 screened *Three Colours: Blue*, a film about a woman who learns to live in the world after all has been taken away from her. (Ken Loach introduced it.) If that isn't a definition of political, I don't know what is."

"I'd like to talk about meaning and form very briefly," says Cécile Wajsbrot. "Hugo von Hoffmansthal talks about form as the meaning of content, and meaning as the essence of

form. It is at this interruption between meaning and form where engagement and politics can be found. In other words: I don't think mainstream fiction can really resist against or quarrel with the times, because then it would no longer be mainstream. Would you respond?"

"This calls to mind Hayden White's book, *The Content of the Form*," says Mukherjee. "For me, content and form interact with each other. As I mentioned in my keynote, all genres perform a social function. I think about content and form a lot, so your comment is very helpful, thank you."

"I have a strange question," says Andrey Kurkov. "Imagine you walk into a bookstore and see your book on the shelf... do you look at the other books around it? Do these book neighbours elicit a response in you? Where is your zone of comfort when you yourself were not the one to choose where to place your book?"

"I don't go into bookshops, out of fear. I assume my book is placed alphabetically, somewhere between Cormac McCarthy and Haruki Murakami, so I'm happy," jokes Mukherjee.

"Say your book was placed in the themed section, 'Politics'. Would you say you are a writer in the army of letters? You *do* have a statement in your novel..."

"I don't think my books can be reduced in that way. With my talk, I was trying to say that engagement is absolutely the opposite of statement. I wanted to think about how statement and engagement became entangled," responds Mukherjee. "But perhaps we have different concepts of what constitutes a statement."

"I spoke with radicalist readers in Kiev recently. For them the bookshop becomes a one-embassy country made up of an author and his 200 readers."

"But we always disappoint these people, don't we," interjects Jeroen Olyslaegers. "My readers come to me expecting to get a literary stamp of approval on their ideology, their point of view. They think I'm going to be their hero but I have to explain to them that what they want is sentimental drivel; it's stupid. It's cynical to expect ideological vindication from literature. There's this utilitarian drive among leftist radicals: give us what we need in order to solidify our worldview into art. I'm sorry, but that is not what I'm here for."

"You're saying *engagé* writers are not writing for *engagé* readers?" asks Kurkov.

"That's sometimes the case, yes," says Olyslaegers. "Anyway, emphasising and trying to define the *engagé* writer can be too distracting."

"What is a political writer in the Ukrainian context, Andrey?" asks Mukherjee.

"In Ukraine and Russia, a political writer is one that gets commissioned by the state to write. It's that simple."

“What about the dissident writers? Those would be the political writers, in my view,” responds Mukherjee.

“That is why the form question is so important. The dissident writers cannot write mainstream novels,” says Cécile Wajsbrot.

“Interesting thought. When Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize, the western world called him the puppet of the Chinese state. I found him unreadable, personally, but maybe that’s just because he’s writing in a different tradition. In a way, as a world writer, he’s a dissident in the western tradition.”

‘Literature saved my life’

After breaking for lunch, the group convenes for the fifth and final session of the seminar, which opens with a [keynote](#) by Amsterdam-based novelist and screenwriter [Gustaaf Peek](#).

Literature saved my life. With these words, Peek launches into a manifold description of his personal journey from disinterested reader to dedicated writer. But his relationship with literature has been tenuous from the start: “My father was a journalist, he sometimes polished his articles at home. Fireman, infantry soldier, astronaut: I never pictured these professions as a child. Work was sitting at a desk and typing blank pages to life. What a choice, I now think. [...] I would like to recall that I was writing for my own pleasure, but that’s not the case. It was a serious game, a competition with myself.”

Peek’s flight to literature was a way to disarm reality and arm himself. “By immersing myself in literature, the world lost its causal connection, things seemed to be just things, slumbering and powerless until the writer would challenge them forcibly, would mobilise them for his quest.”

“Reading or living, I don’t seem to be able to undergo both submissively. I am engaged in a fight. [...] I still haven’t decided whether to see literature as a redemptive force or as a formidable and long-awaited opponent.”

The irony, for Peek, is that we are “naturally wired to catch experiences in words and yet every human being is again the first being.” Literature must be relearned at the beginning of each individual human life; a writer must start from a blank page, equipped with nothing but his imagination and his freedom. And while literature may have saved Gustaaf Peek’s life, there is no guaranteeing its redemptive force for others: “Literature has no goal,” he writes. “I think that is what I am trying to clarify about the space of freedom: the acknowledgement of the unknowability of all striving.”

In the end, writes Peek, “everything dies, everything perishes. It is literature that provides the red lines between generations. I have fiction so as to be able to keep visiting

my loved ones, worship my enemies, reveal myself as an enemy. I have fiction so as not to have to be a fearful child forever.”

Jeroen Olyslaegers opens the discussion: “I have the feeling that you are trying to return to something. This Gustaaf is not the Gustaaf we have heard in discussions the past few days. He seems to be going back, through an act of will, to a state of innocence, writing something, and then returning to reality.”

“I am sensing that, too,” says Andrey Kurkov.

“You don’t give us enough,” says Neel Mukherjee. “When you say literature saved you, what kind of redemption are you talking about? In what ways does literature save you?”

“I think it saved me from a space without imagination. Like I said on Tuesday, I experience language as a virus. Writers need a strong pill to get through the here-and-now. The writer takes the pill, the virus dies, and the writer recuperates, and when you have regained your strength, you can write,” responds Peek.

“My questions for you are more about psychology than literature,” says Andre Kukov. “I have the feeling you had it all in your childhood and then it was taken away from you. Out of all of us, you seem to be the least satisfied, and you have a difficult relationship with literature. Do you crave for more personal, physical space? Is this why you need to write?”

“I think I’m striving to feel OK with myself,” says Peek. “I see writing as a personal battle. I think that is what drives me to write.”

War of words

“Gustaaf, you have said some controversial things in the Dutch press about the welfare state, and specifically about the inequities writers face when it comes to subsidies,” says Matthijs de Ridder.

“In the Netherlands, there have been plenty of cases where the rich benefit more from the welfare state than the poor,” responds Peek. “An established writer might get 30,000 euros of support per book. I know of wealthy homeowners who receive roughly the same amount each year in tax rebates, just for owning a large house.”

“I understand your point,” says Neel Mukherjee, “but you would agree that the welfare state does good for at least some of the have-nots, right?”

“Of course.”

“It’s all about word choice, isn’t it,” says Jeroen Olyslaegers. “As soon as you say the word ‘subsidy’, it becomes a war of words. The state is subsidising banks and coal and

agriculture – virtually every industry receives generous subsidies. When people say, ‘cut subsidies for the arts!’, what they don’t realise is that they’ve become inadvertently vulnerable because their argument defies the very logic of a subsidy; a tool for market correction and competitiveness. When people lobby for cutting arts subsidies, they are really just revealing themselves as art haters. What artists do with just 0.8 percent of the total subsidy budget – it’s truly amazing.”

Neel Mukherjee: “In the UK, the Arts Council has had its budgets slashed serially. Speaking to your point on word choice, Jeroen, I think anything cast as a public good has experienced this. The National Health Service and the BBC, two monumental achievements of post-war UK, are being dismantled in this way, and that is tragic.”

“They’re saying that this is temporary, just part of the economic crisis,” says Olyslaegers. “But you know they are trying to kill funding for the arts. And if they succeed, it will never come back.”

“When you kill the subsidy system, you kill literary culture,” says Mukherjee.

“In Ukraine, you have a literary culture but you have no books and no subsidies. What you have are very small-scale groups of writers helping writers – my friends and I do literary road trips by car, but there aren’t enough writers, not to mention cars, and not everyone can afford to do events for free.”

“There’s a short story there, you driving writers around,” says Mukherjee, smiling.

“A magic bus!” exclaims Kurkov. “You know, a publisher friend of mine once had what you could call a magic bus. When it broke down, he replaced it with a small sedan. Suddenly, there was a dilemma: either take three writers without books or two with books.” Laughs all around.

“But seriously, it has been this way in Ukraine since 1991. There has never been a well-funded cultural policy in Ukraine, and it was never national. Large areas of the country were served by Russian and Hungarian cultural centres. Forty percent of media in Ukraine is Russian-sourced. For twenty-five years, none of the politicians realised how closely cultural borders correlate to political borders. That is still the case to a large extent today.”

“There are quite generous subsidies in Germany for author readings,” says Cécile Wajsbrot. “That’s true,” says Andrey Kurkov. “I know fifty German writers who get more money for their readings than they do for their books.”

“What is the tax situation for writers in your countries?” asks Matthijs de Ridder.

Wajsbrot: “Grants are tax-free in Germany but not in France.”

Mukherjee: "Grants aren't tax-free in the UK but prizes are, the logic being: if you put in an application for something, you have to pay tax on it, but if you are awarded something, you don't."

Olyslaegers: "Five years ago in Ireland, the income of writers was not taxed. I'm not sure what the situation is now. In Belgium, there is a flat tax of fifteen percent, but probably not for long."

Wajsbrot: "Let's all move to Belgium!"

"I think I speak for all of us here when I say that there is a real need for a harmonisation of European principles and laws regarding compensation for writers," says Neel Mukherjee. "That said, writing has survived and even flourished in Europe all this time, despite the very, very difficult financial situation faced by its writers. That is a testament both to the appeal of literature and to its subversiveness."

With that, the final session of Passa Porta's second writers' seminar draws to a close. Discussion gives way to light conversation. Tomorrow, the five writers will present the fruits of three days' labour to a capacity crowd at the [closing event at Passa Porta](#), the buzz just enough to drown out that of the police helicopters hovering overhead.

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